

# Preliminary notes on some birds in Bhutan

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Information is presented on 62 species or species groups for which there are either few or no previous records for Bhutan, or for which the observations included here adds materially to what we know of these species, especially such globally threatened species as Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis* and Beautiful Nuthatch *Sitta formosa*.

The Kingdom of Bhutan forms a significant portion of the Eastern Himalayas Endemic Bird Area (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998) and, despite the lack of knowledge of this country's biodiversity, it has long been designated as a global 'hotspot' for biodiversity. Recent observations would appear to confirm this, especially with regard to its birds. Bhutan's forests are still relatively pristine and consequently have become a priority area for conservation. They probably offer the best and, sadly, the final realistic opportunity for long-term protection of the Eastern Himalayan fauna and flora. Bhutan has, relative to neighbouring areas, a low, albeit growing human population. This factor, plus, until recently, its inaccessibility and consequent lack of development has resulted in the kingdom still supporting 67% of its original forest area. As a consequence, Bhutan provides an internationally significant refuge for a number of threatened species, as well as supporting internationally significant breeding populations of at least 114 species of birds (Inskipp and Inskipp 1993b). However, as Inskipp and Inskipp point out, baseline data are lacking for the birds of Bhutan. The recent easing of access to the country has resulted in a spate of observations of birds, including the recent addition of *c.* 80 species (Clements 1992, Inskipp and Inskipp 1993a, 1993b, Ali *et al.* 1996, Tymstra *et al.* 1996). The observations documented here continue this accumulation of Bhutan bird records, including records of 16 globally threatened or near-threatened species (Collar *et al.* 1994).

In the course of leading five birding tours (on behalf of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours), each of approximately 21 days duration, plus two ancillary private treks, I annually traversed the kingdom from west to east (1994–1998). During these visits a large number of bird observations were accumulated, including the following preliminary notes of specific interest. Field notes, together with many hours of sound recordings of vocalizations in support of the identification of the species enumerated below, are held by the author and are available upon request.

Most observations were made from the paved road that bisects Bhutan from Phuntsholing in the south-west, north to Paro and Thimphu, east to Tashigang and south to Samdrup Jongkhar. Regular forays were made along spur roads to Cheri Monastery, Tashitang and Punakha and the Phobjikha Valley. Additional, short, forays were made along associated walking tracks such as on the east slope of Dochu La and along the road from Ura to Lingmethang (=Limithang). Despite this being a paved road one encounters very little vehicle traffic east of Tongsa, until one reaches the relatively

populated region around the town of Tashigang. As the road bisects extensive areas of pristine forest and terrain that would otherwise be difficult to access, it presents exceptional birding conditions and opportunities. Of pre-eminence is the road from Ura to Lingmethang (Figure 1), which provides an impressive altitudinal transect through magnificent, pristine forest on steep slopes from 3,800 m on Thrumsing La down to 1,600 m. Thereafter the forest is interspersed with a mosaic of traditional farms down to 700 m at the bottom of the Shongar Chhu Valley. The presence of large numbers of Rufous-necked Hornbills *Aceros nipalensis* in addition to Blood Pheasants *Ithaginis cruentus* and Satyr Tragopans *Tragopan satyra* attests to the lack of hunting. Without doubt this is one of the finest birding roads anywhere in Asia. For a description of the preceding localities in west and central Bhutan see Clements (1992), Inskipp and Inskipp (1993a and b), Tymstra *et al.* (1996) and Bishop (1999). East of the Shongar Chhu Valley one climbs to the village of Mongar through an increasingly arid landscape with extensive stands of Chir Pine *Pinus roxburghii*. From Mongar eastwards the road initially climbs through heavily degraded, cool, mixed, broad-leaved forest grading into lightly degraded forest at Kori La. The eastern, upper slopes of Kori La remain largely clothed in bird-rich mixed broad-leaved forest, albeit grazed by cattle en route to and from their summer pastures. Below 1,600 m the landscape once again becomes increasingly arid and the broad-leaved forests give way to stands of Chir Pine. Eventually one descends to the bottom (720 m) of the narrow Gamri Chhu Gorge. Located beneath the town of Tashigang this is a notably austere area with very little vegetation, quite different from the lushness of much of west and central Bhutan. The Tashigang region is more heavily populated than elsewhere in Bhutan, other than around the capital Thimphu. As a result, most of the area has been converted to agriculture. Turning south along the still paved road towards the border town of Samdrup Jongkhar one initially passes through a rather deforested landscape largely converted to cattle pasture, agriculture and scrub with occasional patches of pine woodland. Nevertheless, such habitat is surprisingly rich in birds and I have regularly observed coveys of Kalij Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos* close to the road. Beyond the university town of Kanglung, mixed, cool, broad-leaved forest becomes an increasing feature until just south of Wamrong where the final, and very steep slopes of the Himalayas are extensively covered in pristine forest. Although the transect here is nowhere near as extensive as that of the road from Ura to Lingmethang the forests

are just as magnificent and because they continue, albeit extensively broken below 1,500 m, to 350 m they provide a superb opportunity to sample the birds of lower elevation mixed, warm, broad-leaved and subtropical hill forests. Access to forest at low elevations surrounding Deothang and Samdrup Jongkhar is difficult; however, the few accessible sites have produced a number of interesting records including a number of firsts for Bhutan.

All localities mentioned in the text are shown in Figure 1, together with the main topographical features, heights of passes and major towns and villages. The following is an outline of each of the author's six visits to Bhutan.

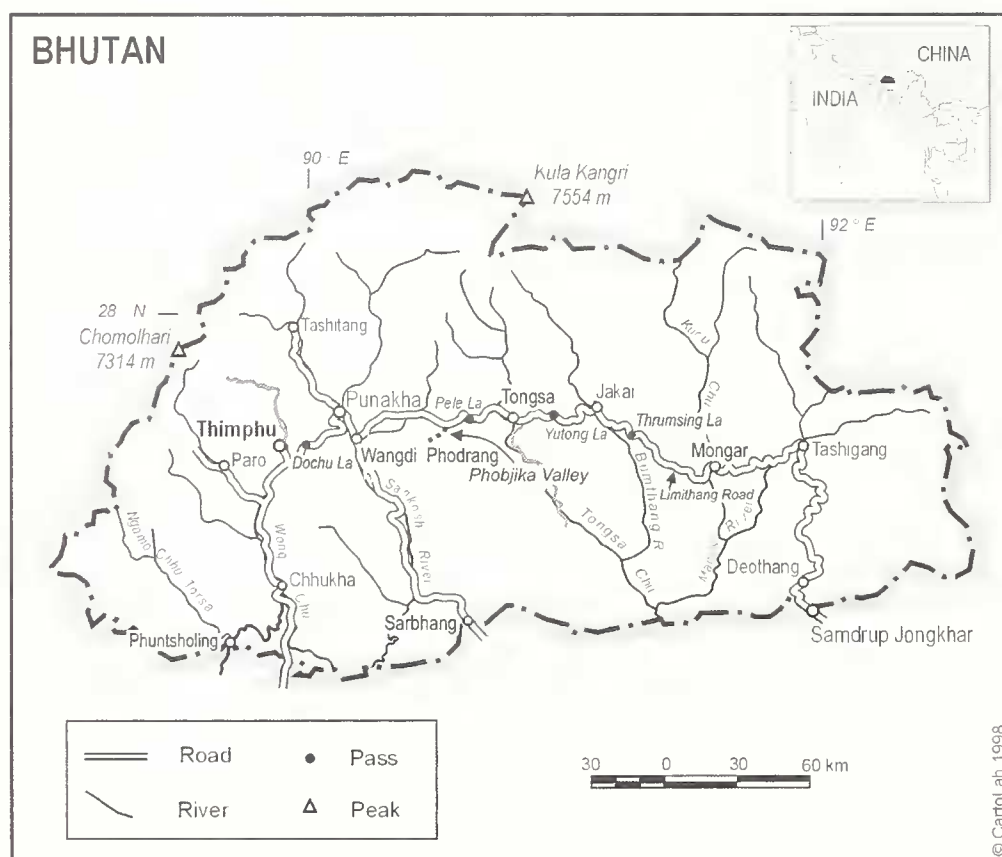
1. 27 February - 12 March 1994: Phuntsholing via Thimphu and the road from Ura to Lingmethang to the Shongkar Chhu Valley and back to Phuntsholing via Tashigang (accompanied by Adam Pain).
2. 21 March - 5 April 1994: Phuntsholing via Thimphu, Dochu La, Tashitang, Phobjikha valley, Tongsa and Bumthang region to the road from Ura to Lingmethang and back to Paro.
3. 3 - 12 March 1995: Thimphu to Zurphai, and then walked on a loop trek via Subrang back to Zurphai. Returned by road to Thimphu and Phuntsholing (accompanied by Adam and Ruth Pain and Rebecca Pradhan).
- 4 - 7. 23 March to 12 April 1995, 21 March to 10 April 1996, 14 April to 1 May 1997, 30 March - 19

April 1998: Paro via Thimphu, Dochu La, Tashitang, Phobjikha Valley, Tongsa, Bumthang region, road from Ura to Lingmethang, Mongar, Tashigang and Deothang to Samdrup Jongkhar.

The following is an annotated list of some of the more interesting records. Many of the observations, especially of migrant species, are either the first (\*) or one of few (\*\*) published records for the country. Where relevant the IUCN threat category (Collar *et al.* 1994) is included.

**SATYR TRAGOPAN** *Tragopan satyra*. Near-threatened. This species appears to be widespread and moderately common in Bhutan. Recorded as follows: A territorial male observed annually (March to April, 1994 - 1997) on the eastern slopes of Dochu La at the same location (3,000 m) within mixed hemlock, spruce and cool broad-leaved forest. Males were also heard giving loud advertising calls from steep slopes within mixed warm broad-leaved forest at 1,800 m and 2,400 m along the road from Ura to Lingmethang (February - April 1994 and 1995). Birds were observed both on the ground and 5-7 m up in semi-recumbent, low stature trees.

**GREY PEACOCK PHEASANT** *Polyplectron bicalcaratum*. Approximately six males calling on 8 April 1996 and a similar number were again heard on 1 May 1997, during the early morning, from within subtropical forest on the steep slopes above the Jongkhar Chhu, 750 m. During 17 - 18 April 1998 a maximum of six birds were calling in partially degraded subtropical forest, at 1,200 m, close to the main Tashigang to Samdrup Jongkhar road, above Deothang.



**Figure 1.** Map of the Kingdom of Bhutan, showing its geographical location within the Indian subcontinent and many of the localities mentioned in the text.



**\*\*INDIAN PEAFOWL** *Pavo cristatus*. On 11 April 1995, a single immature or moulting male flew across the road, within secondary subtropical forest and scrub, 400 m, 10 km north of the town of Samdrup Jongkhar. This species is probably rather local in Bhutan as relatively little suitable habitat appears to be available; however, it is common in neighbouring India in heavily disturbed Sal *Shorea robusta* forest, less than 5 km south of the border.

**\*\*COMMON SHELDUCK** *Tadorua tadorua*. On 3 March 1995, a group of 12 birds on gravel banks along the Puna Tsang Chhu, just above Wangdu Phodrang. On 26 March 1996 a flock of 32 at the same site. Previously recorded by D. Johnson in 1993.

**GADWALL** *Anas strepera*. Recorded annually from March to April. Locally common in flocks of as many as 50 along most broad, glacial river valleys from the Puna Tsang Chhu east to the Jakar Chhu in the Bumthang region. Previously recorded by D. Johnson in 1993 and C. Murphy in 1994.

**\*\*NORTHERN SHOVELER** *Anas clypeata*. On 27 March 1996, a flock of ten, along the Mo Chhu near Tashitang. On 3 April 1998 one pair on the Puna Tsang Chhu.

**\*COMMON POCHARD** *Aythya ferina*. On 27 March 1996, a single, rather drably plumaged drake on the Mo Chhu near Tashitang. On 3 April 1998, a single drake in good plumage, along the Puna Tsang Chhu.

**\*BAER'S POCHARD** *Aythya baeri*. Vulnerable. On 26 March 1994, a single drake in breeding plumage within a broad, forested section of the Mo Chhu, near Tashitang.

**\*\*TUFTED DUCK** *Aythya fuligula*. On 28 March 1995, a single drake along the Puna Tsang Chhu, just above Wangdu Phodrang. On 18 April 1997, a single female was similarly observed on the Puna Tsang Chhu just below Punakha. Previously recorded by I. Barber.

**YELLOW-RUMPED HONEYGUIDE** *Indicator xanthouotus*. Near-threatened. One or two birds recorded annually (March - April), attending a series of large honeycombs of the Giant Honeybee *Apis dorsata*, located high beneath a rocky overhang, above the Yeshey Zam Bridge at 1,700 m, near Buju, 20 km below Tongsa on the Shemgang Road.

**RUFIOUS-NECKED HORNBILL** *Aceros nipalensis*. Vulnerable. Extirpated from large portions of its former range and severely declining in others. As noted by Inskipp and Inskipp (1993b) and Tymstra *et al.* (1997) this species is widespread and moderately common in subtropical and warm broad-leaved forest throughout Bhutan. Recorded from 300 m, just above Phuntsholing in the west, up to an elevation of 1,900 m just below Tongsa, and to 2,200 m along the road above Lingmethang, eastwards to 1,600 m on Kori La and down to 900 m near Deothang.

Rufous-necked Hornbills were found commonly in primary, warm, broad-leaved forest along the road from Ura to Lingmethang, c. 1600 - 2200 m, where groups of up to seven, but more frequently pairs, were observed foraging at fruiting trees overhanging the road. This

species also appears to be common in similar habitat between Wamrong and Deothang in extreme eastern Bhutan along the Tashigang Road.

**WARD'S TROGON** *Harpactes wardi*. Vulnerable. On 31 March 1994 a male was heard and then observed in mixed warm broad-leaved forest at 2,100 m, along the road from Ura to Lingmethang. A second male was heard, a short time later, at 2,060 m along the same road. On 18 April 1997 a very confiding pair was observed for 30 mins within oak-dominated mixed warm broad-leaved forest at 1,800 m, on the lower slopes of Dochu La. During April 1997, additional birds were heard in similar habitat at 2,000 m on the road from Ura to Lingmethang, and at 2,000 m on Kori La. On 11 April 1998 a pair was observed interacting with a single male at the edge of forest along the road from Ura to Lingmethang at 2,100 m.

**\*\*BLYTH'S KINGFISHER** *Alcedo hercules*. Vulnerable. This is a rather localized and little-known species with just one previous published record from Bhutan (Clements 1992). On 7 - 8 March 1995 single birds were regularly observed along the Tchang Dang Chhu, south-central Bhutan, at 1,000 m, within very steep pristine, subtropical forest. On 11 April 1996 one was seen along a narrow, forest-lined gorge of the Jongkhar Chhu, at 400 m near Samdrup Jongkhar. On 1 May 1997, a pair of birds was seen 500 m upstream of the last observation.

**\*\*HODGSON'S HAWK CUCKOO** *Hierococcyx fugax*. Recently recorded from Bhutan for the first time (Tymstra *et al.* 1996). Heard daily from 7-10 April 1996, and seen and heard on six occasions from 17 April to 1 May 1997 at a number of localities throughout Bhutan within partially disturbed subtropical forest below 1,600 m. From 16-18 April 1998 seen and heard moderately commonly in partially degraded subtropical forest, along the road above and below Deothang.

**\*BANDED BAY CUCKOO** *Cacomantis sonneratii*. On 8 April 1996 one was observed, singing persistently from an exposed song-post at the edge of partially disturbed subtropical forest, at 450 m near Samdrup Jongkhar.

**\*\*VIOLET CUCKOO** *Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchus*. On 1 May 1997 one was heard, then seen giving its characteristic flight call, over partially disturbed subtropical hill forest at 450 m, above Samdrup Jongkhar. Previously recorded in spring 1996 (B. King in Robson 1997). On 16 April 1998 a group of three males were seen flying out from the canopy of tall trees chasing one another, within subtropical forest at 1200 m, along the road above Deothang.

**\*\*DARK-RUMPED SWIFT** *Apus acuticauda*. Vulnerable. On 16 April 1998 four were observed for 30 mins, together with Fork-tailed Swifts *Apus pacificus*, at 1,350 m over farmland with scattered trees, 10 km above Deothang. On 17 April 1998 at least ten, together with Fork-tailed Swifts and Himalayan Swiftlets *Collocalia brevirostris*, circled and flew back and forth, during the late afternoon, in an area of steep-sided cliffs and sandstone gorge, partially covered with subtropical forest at 300-450 m.

**\*\*THICK-BILLED GREEN PIGEON** *Treron curvirostra*. On 9 April 1996 two pairs were noted feeding in partially disturbed subtropical forest at 350 m, near Samdrup Jongkhar.

**\*\*BLACK-TAILED CRAKE** *Porzana bicolor*. On 2 March 1994 one was seen well but briefly as it ran across the road and disappeared into rank grass and scrub bordering wet terraced rice-fields, at 700 m, in the Shonkar Chhu Valley. On 14 April 1997 one was watched for several minutes as it fed and scurried within a small, roadside pool, 1 km north of Paro. Previously recorded by Ludlow (Ludlow and Kinnear 1937). See also Inskipp and Round (1989).

**\*PIED AVOCET** *Recurvirostra avosetta*. On 26 March 1996 a group of ten was seen foraging along the edge of the Puna Tsang Chhu, just north of Wangdu Phodrang.

**PALLAS'S GULL** *Larus ichthyaetus*. On 28 March 1995 four birds, in breeding plumage, were seen at the edge of the Puna Tsang Chhu at the lower end of the Punakha valley, at 1,200 m. On 26 March 1996, a flock of 72 birds were counted, mostly in breeding plumage, at the edge of the Puna Tsang Chhu. The few published records of this species for Bhutan refer to only small numbers (Inskipp and Inskipp 1994, Tymstra *et al.* 1997).

**\*BROWN-HEADED GULL** *Larus brunnicephalus*. On 26 March 1996 four birds in breeding plumage were seen at the edge of the Puna Tsang Chhu, just south of Punakha. On 18 April 1997 one in breeding plumage foraged along the Puna Tsang Chhu just north of Wangdu Phodrang.

**PALLAS'S FISH EAGLE** *Haliaeetus leucogaster*. Vulnerable. On 26 March 1994 two immatures were heard calling from a forested section of the Mo Chhu just below Tashitang. On 28 March 1995 two adults perched in scattered trees along the Mo Chhu just below Punakha. On 27 March 1996, an adult and an immature were seen in flight along a heavily forested section of the Mo Chhu just below Tashitang.

**WHITE-RUMPED VULTURE** *Gyps bengalensis*. Notably common around the border towns of Phuntsholing and less so around Samdrup Jongkhar, with flocks of as many as 50 roosting in plantation woodlands at the edge of these towns. Smaller numbers were occasionally observed soaring at c. 1300 m near Deothang.

**\*GREATER SPOTTED EAGLE** *Aquila clanga*. Vulnerable. On 29 February 1994 a group of nine adults and one immature were noted flying rapidly northwards along a narrow valley near Tongsa. On 21 March 1994 at least four adults, together with Steppe Eagles *A. nipalensis* and Black Kites *Milvus migrans* were seen soaring northwards along the Torsa River valley near Phuntsholing. On 28 March 1995 at least four were seen flying northwards up the Punakha valley. On 31 March 1995 one was seen in flight near Chendibji Chorten. In 1996 only one was seen, an adult flying northwards below Tongsa.

**\*\*ORIENTAL HOBBY** *Falco severus*. On 21 April 1997 one circled low overhead for several minutes, at 1,500 m,

high above the Tongsa Chhu, 20 km south of Tongsa. This species was only recorded for the first time in Bhutan a few days earlier near Samdrup Jongkhar (B. King in Robson 1997, D. Farrow in Robson 1997).

**\*\*GREAT CRESTED GREBE** *Podiceps cristatus*. On 26 March 1996 a group of 10 was noted, and on 3 April 1998 a group of three, all in breeding plumage, was seen along the Puna Tsang Chhu just below Punakha. Previously recorded by D. Johnson in 1993.

**\*\*BLUE-FRONTED ROBIN** *Cinclidium frontale*. Near-threatened. On 3 March 1994, a male was seen foraging on the floor of mixed warm broad-leaved forest with a dense understorey, at 1,850 m, along the road between Ura and Lingmethang. On 25 April 1997, at almost the same site, a pair of birds was seen and a brief snatch of putative song was heard.

**\*\*PURPLE COCHOA** *Cochia purpurea*. Near-threatened. On 26 April 1997 a pair of birds perched deep within the heavily shaded mid-storey of mixed warm broad-leaved forest, at 2,200 m, along the road between Ura and Lingmethang.

**\*\*GREEN COCHOA** *Cochia viridis*. On 7 April 1995, together with Adam and Ruth Pain and Rebecca Pradhan, a male was seen foraging in the mid-storey of steep subtropical forest, at 1,000 m, above the Tchang Dang Chhu, south-central Bhutan. On 1 May 1997 a pair of birds foraged in the exposed tops of tall trees within a mosaic of partially degraded subtropical forest and farmland, at 1,400 m, just north of Deothang.

**\*\*PIED BUSHCHAT** *Saxicola caprata*. On 27 April 1997 and 12 April 1998, single males were noted in terraced farmland at 1,600 m, below Mongar.

**\*\*BEAUTIFUL NUTHATCH** *Sitta formosa*. Vulnerable. On 30 April 1997 a group of four birds was seen for 40 mins as they foraged, in company with a small mixed-species flock (including Long-tailed Broadbill *Psarisomus dalhousiae*, a minivet *Pericrocotus*, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus remifer* and Maroon Oriole *Oriolus traillii*). The four nuthatches fed unhurriedly and fairly conspicuously in the mid-storey of tall subtropical forest, above a narrow stream on steep slopes within a narrow valley at 1,400 m above Deothang. They foraged along horizontal and angled branches of moderately large and open trees but rarely foraged along the main trunk. They fed, switching from side to side, as they worked along and upwards, usually for a distance of up to 500 cm before flying a short distance to a new foraging locality.

The earlier record for Bhutan cited for this author in Collar *et al.* (1994) and repeated in Harrap (1996) was a result of a misunderstanding and should be deleted. Previously recorded by B. King and D. Farrow (in Robson 1997)

**RUFIOUS-THROATED WREN BABBLER** *Spelaornis caudatus*. Vulnerable. Recorded annually (March to April, 1994-1997) at the same sites along the road between Ura and Lingmethang at 2,100 m. Individuals and pairs were heard and observed in dense thickets within narrow gullies on steep slopes.



BAR-WINGED WREN BABBLER *Spelaeornis troglodytoides*. One to four pairs were heard and observed annually, within bamboo thickets in mixed cool broad-leaved and Spruce-Hemlock forest, along the road between Ura and Lingmethang, at 2,400–2,910 m.

SPOTTED WREN BABBLER *Spelaeornis formosus*. Near-threatened. Recorded annually throughout Bhutan. Localities included: Tashitang Valley at 1,400 m; Shemgang road below Tongsa at 1,600 m; road between Ura and Lingmethang at 1,450 m; 20 km north of Deothang at 1,500 m; and 10 km east of Deothang at 1,000 m. All records refer to singing birds within dense thickets within warm broad-leaved forest often near to a stream or large creek.

BLACK-HEADED SHRIKE BABBLER *Pteruthius rufiventer*. Near-threatened. In 1995 one was seen and in 1996 a pair of birds was seen associating with a large mixed species flock in the canopy and upper-midstorey of largely pristine warm broad-leaved forest, at 2,400 m, on the steep slopes of the Tashigang road. In addition, on 10 April 1998, a male was observed singing at the edge of mixed warm broad-leaved forest at 2,300 m, along the road between Ura and Lingmethang.

YELLOW-THROATED FULVETTA *Alcippe cinerea*. Near-threatened. Recorded annually. Locally very common in the understorey of cool mixed broad-leaved forest along the road between Ura and Lingmethang, between 700 and 2,200 m. Encountered either as monospecific flocks of 3–25 birds or with mixed species flocks. Individuals were invariably seen foraging on or near the forest floor. Also found in similar habitat but in much lower numbers along the road between Wamrong and Deothang.

GREATER RUFOUS-HEADED PARROTBILL *Paradoxornis ruficeps*. Near-threatened. On 3 April 1996, a relatively noisy group of at least four birds foraging in the tall bamboo understorey of mixed warm broad-leaved forest, at 1,800 m, along the road between Ura and Lingmethang. On 7 April 1996, at least two birds were foraging in similar, but slightly degraded, habitat at 1,500 m, 20 km above Deothang. On 26 April 1997, a group of four were foraging at the same site as on 3 April 1996. On 10 April 1998, a group of approximately four birds was seen feeding partially upside down, 0.5 m off the ground, on young bamboo stems, at 1,800 m on the road between Ura and Lingmethang. On 17 April 1998, a group of 10 foraged, shortly after dawn, among the flower buds of a tall, broad-leaved canopy tree, along the Tashigang Road, 5 km north of Deothang.

\*CHAFFINCH *Fringilla coelebs*. On 29 March 1995, a male was seen in partially degraded oak-dominated mixed warm broad-leaved forest, at 1,400 m, at the start of the Tashitang trail. Attention was initially drawn by the characteristic single *pink* notes uttered by the bird as it

foraged in a dense thicket. Regularly recorded in Nepal (Inskipp and Inskipp 1991) but this record is 420 km further east than the previous Himalayan records.

\*PINK-BROWED ROSEFINCH *Carpodacus rodochrous*. On 16 April 1997 at least two females were noted within a mosaic of mainly Blue Pine and mixed oak *Quercus semecarpifolia* forest along the Thimphu Chhu below Cheri Monastery.

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